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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of evidence that specialization in violent crimes is rare and that it is hard to identify distinguishing characteristics of violent offenders. The purpose of this study, conducted in a Pacific Northwest city, was to determine whether violent behavior is, in fact, a manifestation of high rates of antisocial behavior in general, and that the violent adolescent offender is a member of the broader category of multiple offenders. The study population included 200 boys recruited from elementary schools in neighborhoods with a high incidence of delinquency. The boys were assessed yearly between 4th and 10th grade. Assessments consisted of parent and child interviews, home observations, videotaped interaction tasks, school data, and juvenile court records. Study findings indicated that: (1) all offenders with an arrest for violence by 10th grade had been arrested at least twice for a nonstatus offense, and that the 17 repeat offenders with arrests for violence had twice as many arrests as repeat offenders with no arrests for violence; (2) by age 17, 55% of multiple offenders had 1 arrest for violence; (3) there were few differences in the family backgrounds and developmental histories of violent and nonviolent juvenile offenders once frequency of arrest was controlled for; (4) families with violent adolescents had lower per capita incomes and higher antisocial behavior among the fathers than other families; and (5) all multiple offenders, violent and nonviolent, showed elevated antisocial behavior and deficits in other areas, with the nonviolent group showing slightly more problematic behavior than the violent group. (AC)

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The violent adolescent male: Specialist or generalist?

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Can we predict who will become violent and what are the developmental histories, characteristics, and family background of those who become violent? This is a critical question for those interested in designing interventions to prevent violence.

There is a growing body of evidence that specialization in violent crimes is rare and that it is hard to identify distinguishing characteristics of violent offenders. We take the position that violence is a manifestation of high rates of antisocial behavior in general and that the violent adolescent offender is a member of the broader category of multiple offender.

Figure 1

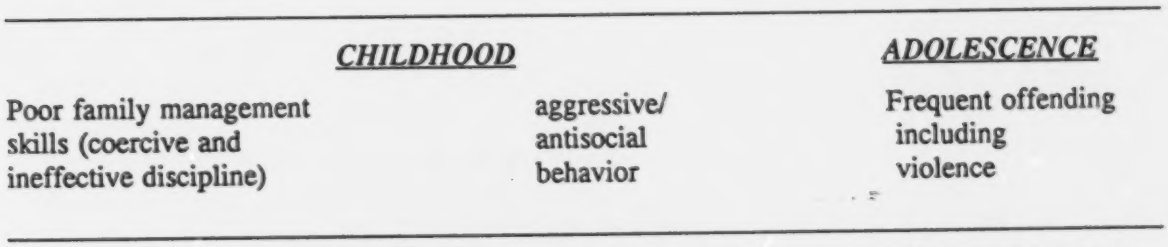

Figure 1 shows a model showing whereby poor family management skills in childhood, especially coercive or ineffective discipline, leads to aggressive/antisocial behavior in childhood and frequent offending, including violence, in adolescence. A structural equation modeling analysis with the Oregon Youth Study sample showed a path of .72 between antisocial behavior at Grade 4, and delinquency at Grade 7.

Farrington (1991) examined the issue of whether violent behavior is just one element of a general antisocial tendency, or whether it reflects a more specific underlying violent tendency. Controlling for frequency of offending, he compared early antisocial behavior and parental variables for adult violent offenders and frequent, but nonviolent offenders. Predictor variables from childhood and adolescence showed almost no differences between the two groups, though both groups showed considerably more risk and antisocial behavior at early ages than the nonconvicted or occasionally convicted men. The purpose of the current study was to attempt to replicate the Farrington findings for adolescent offenders.

We tested the hypothesis that violent adolescent offenders would be indistinguishable from frequent offenders for an at-risk sample of 200 boys in the Oregon Youth Study. The sample is described in Table 1.

Table 1

Oregon Youth Study Sample

Medium-sized Pacific Northwest city

Recruited from elementary schools with high incidence of delinquency in the neighborhood

74.4% of Grade 4 boys and families agreed to participate

Grade 4 N = 206 Grade 10 N = 200

Yearly multi-method/agent assessments including parent and child interviews, home observations, videotaped interaction tasks, school data, and records data including juvenile court

20% no employed parent
33% on welfare
50% moved in first 2 years of study.
42% boys arrested by end of Grade 10

Hypotheses

The four hypotheses to be addressed in this article are as follows:

1. Violent offenders are more likely to be multiple offenders.

2. High rate or chronic offenders are at risk for committing violent crimes by ages 16 to 17.

3. There would be no difference between violent and nonviolent offenders on contextual, family management, or earlier measures of boy's behavior once frequency of arrests was controlled.

4. Violent offenders would not self-report more violent acts then nonviolent offenders matched for frequency of arrests.

Results

1. (Hypothesis # 1) Violent offenders are more likely to be multiple offenders. All offenders with an arrest for violence by Grade 10 had been arrested at least twice for a nonstatus offense. All but one had also been arrested for at least one nonviolent offense. The 17 repeat offenders with arrests for violence had twice as many arrests as repeat

offenders with no arrests for violence (n = 21) (8.06 vs. 4.33). We did find, therefore, that violent offenders were more likely to be multiple offenders.

To control for differences in arrest rates, we created a matched sample by eliminating offenders with only two arrests and one boy with 28 arrests (17 more than next most frequent), resulting in 15 violent multiple offenders and 13 nonviolent multiple offenders (with 7.1 and 5.77 arrests respectively, n.s.)

2. (Hypothesis #2) The high-rate adolescent offender is at high risk for an arrest for violence. At age 16-17, .55 of multiple offenders (3+ arrests) had one arrest for violence. (Farrington's probability for adults was .49).

3. (Hypothesis #3) There would be no difference between violent and nonviolent multiple offenders on contextual, family management, and Grade 4 measures of boys' behavior. Measures of family context and family management are described in Table 2.

Table 2

Measures
Family Context
Income
Family size
Socio-economic status (education & occupation)
Number of transitions: Parental transitions since the boy's birth. Codes 0, 1, 2, or 3+
Mother's and father's antisocial behavior
- *Arrest records & driver's license suspensions*
- *Substance use (alcohol, marijuana, drugs)*
- *MMPI hypomanic and psychopathic deviate subscales*
- *Mother's age at first birth*
Family Management
Monitoring/supervision
- *Child interview*
- *Parent & child interviewer impressions*
- *Parent bi-weekly telephone interview*
Discipline
- *Nattering or negative behavior of parent to boy in the home observations*
- *Abusive behavior in the home observations*
- *Observer impressions*
- *Mother interview*

Contextual factors and the family management constructs of monitoring and discipline at Grade 4 for the violent and nonviolent multiple offender groups based on arrests at age 16-17 are presented in Table 3. Means for parents' antisocial behavior and family management were standardized on the whole sample of 200.

Table 3

Contextual & Family Factors: At Grade 4

MULTIPLE OFFENDERS

	Nonviolent (13)	Violent (15)	P.
Family contextual factors:			
Per capita income	$2,961	$1,794	<.10
Family size	4.08	4.40	NS
SES	29.8	26.1	NS
# Parental transitions	1.7	2.0	NS
Antisocial behavior:			
Mother	.73	.45	NS
Father/stepfather	-.27(n = 8)	.83(n = 8)	<.01
Family management constructs:			
Monitor	-.30	.02	NS
Discipline	-.83	-.42	NS

Contextual factors and parents' antisocial behavior were run as ONEWAY analyses of variance. The family management factors of monitoring and discipline were run as a MANOVA for which the omnibus statistic was nonsignificant. There was a trend for the families with violent adolescents to have lower per capita incomes and higher antisocial behavior among the fathers. The father data was based on very low *n*'s and, therefore, the means could be strongly affected by scores for one father. Note that in each of the groups, four fathers were biological and four were step-fathers. Note also that mothers' antisocial behavior was well above the sample mean for both groups and discipline showed a substantial deficit in both groups. Means for monitoring and discipline at Grade 10 (not

reported here) showed substantial and similar deficits in the two groups.

Means on boys' behavior constructs at Grade 4 by offender group at Grade 10 are shown in Table 4. Again, these constructs were standardized on the full sample of 200. The boys' scores for antisocial behavior in both groups were considerably above the sample mean (for a normal distribution, .5 standard deviations above the mean is approximately the 70th percentile). The teacher and parent CBC-L scales were from the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). Other constructs comprised means of multimethod/multiagent data that included parent and child interviews and questionnaires, teacher questionnaires, peer nominations (peer relations and deviant peer association), and school records data (academic skills).

Table 4

Boys' behavior constructs: Grade 4			
	Nonviolent	*Violent*	
Teacher CBC-L violence	.54	.45	NS
Parent CBC-L violence	.07	.33	NS
Overt antisocial behavior	1.0	.61	NS
Covert antisocial behavior	1.2	.53	NS
Peer relations	-.82	-.76	NS
Deviant peer association	.81	.68	NS
Academic skills	-.85	-.46	NS
Depression	.85	.21	$<.10$
Self-esteem	-.73	-.02	NS
Drug sampling	.62	-.06	NS

The omnibus statistic for the MANOVA was nonsignificant. All multiple offenders, violent and nonviolent, showed elevated antisocial behavior and deficits in other areas. The means generally showed more problematic behavior for the nonviolent than violent group, though not significantly so. The trend toward higher depression in the nonviolent group could possibly indicate that depression acts as a suppressor for violent behavior in males.

Note that drug sampling was very skewed at Grade 4. Means for Grade 10 (not reported here) showed similar patterns and elevated substance use in both groups.

4. (HYPOTHESIS #4) Violent offenders would not self-report more violent acts than matched nonviolents. Self-report data from Elliott delinquency schedule, Grade 10, was used for these analyses. Percentages of boys in the two groups reporting 0, 1, or 2+ offenses in the past year for the two groups (NV = nonviolent, V = violent) are shown in Table 5. The self-report data was categorized as violent or nonviolent, and further categorized by FBI index (more serious) or non-index offenses. These data indicate very similar levels of self-report delinquency in each category for the violent and nonviolent groups. There was no tendency for the violent multiple offenders to report more violence in the past year than the nonviolent multiple offenders.

Table 5

Self-report violence at age 15-16 for violent and nonviolent multiple offenders.

Self-report delinquency:				
Nonviolent		**0**	**1**	**2+**
Total non-index	NV	25%	0	75%
	V	29%	14%	57%
Total index	NV	54%	0	46%
	V	67%	0	33%
Violent				
Total non-index	NV	39%	15%	46%
	V	33%	17%	40%
Total index	NV	61%	8%	31%
	V	60%	7%	33%

Conclusions:

1. Violent offenders are more frequent offenders, and all but one had arrests for nonviolent offenses too. The majority of violence in the sample was part of a pattern of high rates of antisocial behavior rather than a specialized trajectory. This finding agrees with other

studies. Farrington concluded that the causes of aggression and violence must be essentially the same as the causes of persistent and extreme antisocial, delinquent, and criminal behavior. Cases of specialization in violence may occur, but these would appear to be rare.

2. Few differences were found in family backgrounds and developmental histories of violent and nonviolent juvenile offenders once frequency of arrest was controlled. There was a trend to lower per capita income and higher father arrest rates for the violent group. Especially in the latter case, this was based on a very low n. Elliott has found that certain factors (e.g., social class and race) can affect arrest rates, self-reported rate of offending being held equal. It may be that lower income families with a criminal father are more known to the police and justice system, and that adolescents in those families are more vulnerable to arrest. A second explanation of the finding regarding low income could be that violent offenders tend to come from more deprived backgrounds.

3. Similarities between the two groups were found for self-report violence, including index or serious violent offenses.

4. Programs to prevent violence in adolescence should be synonymous with programs to prevent high-rate chronic offending and the best predictor of chronic offending in adolescence is childhood antisocial behavior.

Reference

Achenbach, T. M., & Edelbrock, C. S. (1983). *Manual for the child behavior checklist and the revised child behavior profile*. Burlington, VT: Author.

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